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AUTHOR Hess, Lucille J.; Hess, Richard C.
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ABSTRACT

Personal intent and discourse considerations play an important role in understanding the nature of a conversation between a youth and an elderly person. Each participant makes assumptions about the listener's knowledge and ability to communicate effectively. The way a speaker reacts to the other participant depends upon the speaker's own assumptions and perceptions about the other, the other participant's role, and what each believes to be the real topic of discussion. For effective communication to occur between a youth and an elderly person, four criteria must be fulfilled: (1) the participants must be viewed as unique or worthy of the exchange, (2) they must experience the expected balance of inclusion and affection, (3) they must engage in a fluctuating balance of "investment stake" during the conversation, and (4) they must adhere to certain conversational rules such as turn-taking, sticking to a topic, returning with a "new" component for the message, and answering in an appropriate manner. Interference or misinterpretation occurs when participants have false assumptions or fail to meet the expected exchange of messages due to sensory, physical, or cognitive differences. The result is information distortion, message failure, and social discomfort. A poorly defined relationship, often found with elderly people, results in distortion of the meaning in shared utterances. (RL)

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Inclusion, Affection, Control: The Pragmatics of Intergenerational Communication

by

Lucille J. Hess and Richard C. Hess

A paper prepared for the 1981 SCA Summer Conference on Communication and Gerontology, July 22-24, 1981, Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville, Edwardsville, Illinois.

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Lucille J. Hess is currently a doctorial student in Speech and Hearing Sciences at Indiana University-Bloomington.

Richard Hess is an Assistant Professor of Communication at Indiana University-Purdue University at Fort Wayne.

Inclusion, Affection, Control:

The Pragmatics of Intergenerational Communication

Communication behaviors across a life span will reveal attitudes, self-concepts, the perception of self images in family settings in general, and interpersonal settings in particular.

The art of communication is the operationalization of an inner drive to do something. At the level of interpersonal communication Schutz (1966) suggested that the doing will focus on an attempt to be included in a group, to influence others, or to realize a sense of control over one's environment. The doing is an extension on the part of the communicator. The communicator must extend himself through language to another person. With that extension of the self, communication becomes a social act (Ehninger 1978, p. 88). Each message in the social interaction is determined by two major components: 1) personal intent or the function of the communication (pragmatics) and 2) the social features of the situation (discourse). (Tamir, 1979, p. 29) The goals of this investigation will be to survey the personal intent of the communication of the elderly with the young in order to understand the effect of such communication on the self-concept and the self-worth of the communicators. Specifically, we are interested in understanding cross generational communication from the pragmatic concerns for the ability of such communication to reflect the interpersonal needs of inclusion, control and affection.

Personal Intent

In an interpersonal exchange each participant determines the goal of the communication, how to achieve that goal and how to influence the other to share in that goal. (Tamir, 1979, p. 23) Good communication requires

bi-lateral negotiation with each member developing his own interests and influencing the other. (Bengtson and Black, 1973, p. 209) Schutz (1966) suggests that three personal conditions or basic needs directly influence the purpose and quality of communication. The need of inclusion, affection and control directly affect, form, or maintain the self-concept and self-worth notions. Self-concept and self-worth are integral parts in the communication exchange.

The need to be included is one of the major reasons humans communicate. Schutz (1966) defines the importance of inclusion in determining the level of feelings and mutual interest. To be included one must be identifiable from others. He must have unique characteristics that separate him from the group. The element of inclusion affects communication by the extent one feels comfortable in initiating conversation and by how the speaker views himself in light of those to whom he is speaking. In other words, for healthy interpersonal communication to occur, one must be viewed by himself and others as unique and worthy to be included in one's thoughts. The fluctuation between initiating the conversation and being addressed can significantly influence the level and quality of communication. If extreme ends of the range are experienced by both participants, communication is distorted if it occurs at all. Woelfel (1976, p. 68) posits that most people talk with those of a similar age and background. Our society tends to cluster people of similar ages together. What cross-generational exchange that does occur is found within families and work settings. For the elderly person the range of others his age may be limited and thus inclusion in a major group has also been decreased.

Social isolation can greatly diminish cognitive and communicative performance. (Tamir, 1979, p. 138; Eysneck, 1975, p. 254) Eisdorfer and Lawton

suggest that because of social isolation older people tend to conform to ideas and are slower to express dissent. (1973, p. 581) The older people rather conform out of a sense of maintaining commitment (inclusion) to a group rather than merely wanting to please others. Communication that reflects the desire to be included may be misread by the listener to mean that the speaker is passive or lacks the ability to make decisions. In addition, conformity adds to the speaker blending in and not being seen as a unique person.

Unfortunately, elderly people are not viewed as individuals within a group by younger people (Haak, 1976, p. 29) Once a person is cast as elderly, perceptions are immediately transferred regardless of validity. Measuring interest level in individuals on a bus, Nardi (1973) found that young people were indifferent to aged people but expressed interest in the same person if the adjective "old" was not used. Rubin and Brown (1975, p. 465) discovered young people who were shown pictures of people ranging from infancy to elderly, attributed lower intelligence and lack of power and influence to the elderly. Only children were viewed as having less power. Such findings support the authors' theory that the perceiver makes attributional judgments about the elderly person and assumes a set of expectancies regardless of the individual's actual ability. If these assumptions are made, the elderly person is more isolated and may experience social discomfort because he is not recognized as a unique individual.

When comparing young people to the elderly, Fitzgerald (1978, p. 400) found differences in how each group viewed themselves and each other. The older people viewed themselves as nurturers. They initiated conversation in a nurturing, informative manner stating that their major interest and concern

was for affiliation and assistance to the younger people. The young people viewed themselves as explorers, innovators whose major concern was for control and power. Each group viewed the other as jeopardizing their own self-concepts and goals. The young interpreted the nurturing of the elderly as attempts to compete. The older people viewed the young as rejecting what they had worked for. When these views are held by the participants in a conversation, communication will break down. Neither side is included and may in fact be on opposite sides.

Another need Schutz (1966) discusses as important to good communication is affection. Unlike inclusion where intimacy is not necessary, affection depends upon a dyadic, intimate relationship. Schutz suggests one must feel loved and lovable. For many of the elderly, confidants and intimate partners have died and they must establish or strengthen bonds with other family members or friends. The family may represent a unit for affectional ties or it may represent merely an inclusion group without affection. Bengtson and Culter (1976, p. 148) posit that the dimension of affection may be more important for the elderly than merely being included and having an assistance base. The family is an inter-generational unit comprised for three basic need fulfilling elements. 1) The family participates in informal activities such as recreation or assisting each other. 2) There are the ritual ceremonies and gatherings which form social outlets. 3) The confidant status evolves with affection and intimate knowledge of another. Bengtson and Culter call this subjective solidarity. In their study, Bengtson and Culter found that the elderly viewed the affection component as more important and initiated conversations in that direction. The younger people reported higher levels of involvement with the first two categories. The younger people have more

opportunities for intimate partners and may indeed have others who they view as primary recipients of their affection. If the purpose of the communication from the elderly person's point of view is to establish and maintain affectional ties, communication can breakdown and perhaps even cause discomfort to both participants if the younger member of the dyad does not share that view. From the younger participants' perspective, the communication may center on the needs and plans for the future and he may be frustrated if these concerns are not adequately addressed.

Bengtson and Kuypers (1971, p. 255) further report the above ideas from a study analyzing generational differences. The older members are interested in maintaining their already established ties while the young are focused on developing intimate relationships with peers. Kalesh and Knudtson (1976, p. 177) assert that all attachments of affection depend on action initiated social feedback system. In order for the elderly person to establish affection bonds he must view himself as vigorous and concerned with feelings. If the elderly person does not receive feedback in terms of affectionate responses to his initiations, communication will break down. More effort will be required to assert oneself again to achieve the intimate contact that may be very needed. It would not be unusual for the elderly person to withdraw and not make demands upon the others for no one wants to face rebuff. When these views are not recognized, the quality of the communication becomes superficial, no one's needs are met and the situation becomes uncomfortable.

Lack of affection and social isolation seem to be felt predominantly by upper class women who expected more of the interaction with their family than they perceived they had. Although 68 percent of the women Brown (1960, p. 171) studied had weekly or oftener contact with their children, one speculates it

was not the frequency of the contact but the quality that caused dissatisfaction. Lower class women did not feel the lack of affection and they did not expect the family to maintain high frequency visits.

The third factor Schutz (1966) considers integral to the effective interpersonal communicative function is control or power. The range of control is defined as having complete direction or influence over the behavior of others to being completely influenced or directed by others. To be in control involves responsibility for one's self, the ability to make decisions and the ability to persuade or influence others. Turner (1975, p. 112) proposes that the degree of power given an older person depends upon his physical, economic and psychological resources as well as the dependency of others upon him. Bengtson and Culter (1976, p. 147) refer to this interaction in terms of "developmental stake." The relationship will vary according to how it enables each participant to achieve their personal goals. Thibaut and Kelley posit that the durability of a relationship is dependent upon the number of alternatives a person has. (Verderber, 1978, p. 134) Those with few options are in the most jeopardy of not having their needs met. In other words, the power or control of the interaction will swing to the person who has the least investment in achieving his goal dependent upon the interchange. For the young, parents have the power because the child is dependent. As the child reaches adulthood the power equalizes, and the parental threat is removed from the relationship. The young adult has the least investment in the communication with older people as the young person's goals are to create and develop intimacy with peers and develop distinctiveness. (Bengtson and Culter, 1976, p. 147) The young person may tolerate input from the older individual or he may be irritated by it. To the younger person, elderly people are of low

saliency and unimportant to achieving his goal. (Bengtson and Kuypers, 1971, p. 258) On the other hand, the older person believes his worth and values are carried on through the young, thus realizing a higher "stake" in the exchange. Personal verification of self worth can be attempted through control or power plays with the young. (Bengtson and Kuypers, 1976, p. 259)

Haak (1976, p. 31) expresses the power/respect conflict in another way. He suggests there is inequity in communication with the elderly because of lack of respect for older persons. He asserts that communication with the elderly consists of 1) telling them what (you think) they need to know and 2) telling them but only if they ask. Haak proposes that communication should consist of telling them even though they do not ask.

The interplay between the elderly and the social system in terms of control and power becomes a vicious cycle. Kuypers and Bengtson (1973, p. 198) suggest that as one ages the more one becomes vulnerable and without power because the historical, familiar sources of feedback about self worth decrease. The elderly person becomes more dependent upon external evaluation and labeling which in many cases suggests incompetence. Kalesh and Knudtson (1976, p. 176) support these concepts by suggesting that as roles disappear the elderly person is returned to child-like status of helplessness. The investment stakes become higher with dependency. The hidden power the independent person has is that he governs the frequency and quality of the contact. Elderly people engage in communicative ploys to assure continuity in the return of the caretaker and maintain the relationship regardless of the quality. Stafford cited the technique of eliciting promises of specific times and days for return visits of family and friends. (Grimshaw, 1974, p. 332) If the elderly person feels compelled to use these ploys, certainly the communicative exchange

is not equal, affection needs may not be set and the self worth of the older person has not been raised. If the prerogative of the visiting schedule is in the control of the visitor, the elderly person may be dissatisfied with the relationship but his "stake" is so high that any contact is better than none at all. (Tamir, 1979, p. 148)

Another facet to the exercise of control concerns the amount of dependency others have on the older person. Young people tend to make few demands on the elderly. They feel that demanding less makes the young person more mature. (Tamir, 1979, p. 148) However, this lack of dependency on each other strains the communication. The elderly person is placed in a subordinate relationship and is denied the opportunity for maintaining a self image of worth. Hampe and Blevins (1975, p. 27) report that older women in their study felt useless due to the realization that they were no longer integral parts of society or of the family. They felt that they were not needed. In order to avoid the subordinate role, the elderly person withdraws requests for assistance, particularly when they feel that they cannot return a service. Many elderly people phrase this in terms of "not being a burden to their children." (Tamir, 1975, p. 114)

The seriousness of the need for inclusion, affection and control cannot be stressed too strongly in the influence upon the communication process. The role each participant plays determines the level and course of the discussion. If one speaker has power to influence the self-concept of another in a negative manner, the communication becomes superficial, strained and no one interacts sufficiently. The meaning of the message is lost. (Tamir, 1979, p. 31)

Discourse Functions

The role each participant takes in the interaction can be viewed differently

from each person's perspective. A mismatch is more likely to occur when the participants do not know each other well. Each is aware of his own personal history but not that of the other. (Tamir, 1979, p. 27) For communication to occur, each participant must take the other's place and consider what knowledge is brought to the situation, the individual's needs and how the speaker himself may be viewed by the other participant. Tamir (1979, p. 23) suggests that the presuppositions each participant holds about the other greatly influences the nature of the message.

Cohort interchange is less strained as experiences and expectancies are similar and based on a broader area of common ground. (Tamir, 1979, p. 28) The chance of conversing with cohorts decreases with age. Often aged people have little opportunity to talk with anyone who is their own age. Rubin and Brown (1975, p. 66) report that young people modify their speech by making it simpler and using less words per utterance when talking to someone perceived as elderly. The speech pattern and pitch levels used are similar to those used with children. The conclusion they draw is that older adults are viewed as less competent and are talked to as if they are.

Weinberg (1972, p. 214) proposes that elderly people are assigned subordinate roles in communication because of American's value upon action, achievement and power. Because of retirement or ill health, elderly people are perceived as having stopped doing and being productive. They are seen as depreciated by young people. Haak (1976, p. 29) complains that words used to talk about elderly people connote this inactive, unproductive attitude. Haak refers to the word "retiree" as implying inactivity in the work sphere and that most people generalize it to mean unproductive in all functions.

If the role perspectives and power are not shared equally in a give and

take fashion, the content of the communication can become ambiguous and meaningless. Who dominates the conversation and how often each participant takes a turn adding to or changing the topic are important indicators of the power interplay. The subordinate member will be less likely to dominate or exert control over the message. If the elderly person does dominate a conversation it is usually a monologue and the listener may have tuned out. It is doubtful that this can be called communication. In our review of the literature, we could find no study where the turn-taking exchange was examined. This would be an excellent area to explore for various settings and individuals. The comments we made above may not hold true and we may indeed find other patterns that are now unknown.

Topic

Older persons have been accused of being egocentric, talking about themselves and not considering the other person's point of view and interests. Looft and Charles (1971, p. 21) suggest that older people were more egocentric in their study than the young people. They conclude however, that egocentrism seemed to be more related to the distance of common knowledge of the other or the topic of conversation and social isolation. Egocentrism is not a condition that need be associated with aging, rather it is more a symptom of isolation. If one is limited in the social contacts, there is more opportunity to become centered on one's own ideas. (Tamir, 1979, p. 139)

Keeping the listener's abilities and interests in mind is an important part of an exchange about a given topic. In addition, the speaker must attend to what part of the message is old or known information and what part is new information. Each utterance involves the "given and new" strategy to assist staying on the topic. The speaker must keep in mind what was previously said, the social context of the dialogue, and how the new idea fits the discussion

and listener knowledge. Cognitive skills like short term memory must be functioning adequately, sensory mechanism operating so the message is not distorted and the ability to respond within a reasonable time frame are important ingredients. In subtle ways, the changes the elderly person experiences can accumulate and diminish the integrity of the conversation. (Tamir, 1979, p. 138)

It is quite likely that the topic a young and old person discuss will be approached from different perspectives. The old are living in the present while relating past experience and knowledge accumulated to the topic under discussion. Butler (1968, p. 136) suggests to reminisce contributes to the elderly person's self awareness, acceptance and sense of personal continuity. It is an attempt on the elderly person's part to achieve mutuality of reference and interest. (Tamir, 1979, p. 144) Unfortunately, this is a shakey base for mutual interaction because the young are future oriented. Heider (1958, p. 203) refers to the imbalance of past and future perspectives as ingredients which cause discomfort. There is an urgency to influence the other person to see personal opinions which is confounded by inequality of power. The elderly become frustrated by their subordinate position and their inability to convey their important message. The result can be artificial conversation stripped of meaning. (Tamir, 1979, p. 142)

Conclusion

To summarize (See Table I) personal intent and discourse considerations play an important role in understanding the nature of a conversation between a youth and an elderly person. Each participant makes assumptions about the listener's knowledge and ability to effectively communicate. The way a speaker reacts to the other member depends upon his own assumptions and perceptions about the other, their roles, and what each believes to be the real topic of

discussion. (Foss and Haykes, 1978, p. 175) For effective communication to occur four criterion must be fulfilled: 1) the participants must be viewed as unique or worthy of the exchange; 2) they must experience the expected balance of inclusion and affection; 3) they must engage in a fluctuating balance of "investment stake" during the conversation; and 4) they must adhere to certain conversational rules such as turn-taking, sticking to a topic, returning with a "new" component for the message, and answering in an appropriate manner. Interference or misinterpretation occurs when participants have false assumptions or fail to meet the expected exchange of messages due to sensory, physical or cognitive differences. The result is information distortion, message failure and social discomfort. A poorly defined relationship often found with elderly citizens results in distortion of the meaning in shared utterances. (Tamir, 1979, p. 142)

Although we have information about how the elderly are perceived and how they perceive themselves, further research should utilize discourse analysis techniques.

> For instance, through turn-taking analysis of natural conversations the following can be determined: a) How will the communication of the elderly vary in different settings? b) What is the effect, if any, of the age of the elderly? c) What is the effect of differing backgrounds of the communicants? d) What is the effect of age on sticking to a topic? e) What is the effect of age on domination of the conversation? f) What is the effect of age on initiating new ideas in a conversation? g) What is the effect of age on topic selection in a conversation? and h) What is the effect of awareness of listener knowledge as indicated by the responses to statements in the conversation?

There is a great deal more to know about how and about what the elderly communicate. There is little research, at present, in the area. We have much to learn about how the basic needs of inclusion, affection, and control actually influence communication with the elderly.

Table I

Discourse Influences	Optimal Communication	Minimal Communication
I. Pragmatics- (function)		
A. Inclusion	varied social contacts	limited social contacts
	high cohorts	low cohorts
	high mobility	low mobility
	high family contact	low family contact
	individuality	lacks individuality
	topic: exploration	topic: affiliation
B. Affection	high opportunity for dyads	low opportunity for dyads
	seek new/vary dyads	maintain old/limit on new dyads
	high match with expectancy needs	low match with expectancy needs
C. Control/Power	low investment "stake"	high investment "stake"
	low dependency	high dependency
	establish own values	live values thru others (youth)
	high respect	low respect
	high self worth	low self worth
	high other dependency	low other dependency
II. Discourse		
A. Role	participants well known	participants not well known
	high cohort contact	low cohort contact
	equal partners	subordinate position
B. Topic	other oriented	egocentric
	recognize given/new information	slow to recognize given/new information
	present/future oriented	past oriented

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